

Publishing Executive

Production Managers, the Industry's Next Dinosaur

By Steven W. Frye

February 1, 2005

It started with the typesetters in the early 1980s. Film strippers, dot-etchers and camera operators were the casualties of the 1990s. Color separators had to quickly reinvent themselves to survive the transition into the electronic millennium. Who is the industry's next obsolete professional?

It appears to be the production manager. Is it possible to produce a magazine without a production manager? More and more magazines are doing just that. Like the typesetters and film-based prepress specialists, many responsibilities of the production manager are being replaced by technology or absorbed into other departments.

At one time, it was unheard of to even consider that any publication could ever get produced without the spearheading drive of the production manager (PM). The PM put everything together: the schedule, vendors, materials, staff, supplies and ultimately the delivery of product. They were responsible for quality and costs.

PMs were the only managers who regularly worked with every other department—editorial, art, advertising, circulation, marketing and executive management. Outside of the company, they worked with artists, photographers and advertisers, as well as typesetters, camera operators, color separators, dot-etchers, film strippers, paper suppliers, printing salesmen, press operators, mailing companies and the Post Office.

PMs also had to manage supplies—and there used to be a lot of supplies. Art boards with printed templates in non-photo blue to the printer's specifications, tissue and acetate overlay material, X-acto knives and blades, Rapidograph pens and ink, stat camera film and paper, rubber cement and/or spray mount, etc., etc., etc.

Production managers put together the extremely complicated production schedule. They determined page count. They laid out the magazine, telling both advertising and editorial where their pages could go, telling them where they can and cannot have color or positioning. They juggled schedules and solved impossible problems. They had power. They were magicians. They were gods.

And they appear to be next in the line for extinction.

The evolution of a new breed technology, or more specifically, desktop publishing, has eliminated most of the in-house production responsibilities of page assembly and color management. It has changed internal scheduling, staffing and supply needs. Programs like Quark, InDesign and PhotoShop have completely changed the workflow of page makeup.

Information technology (IT) staff have replaced the internal management of these services. In many cases, these people also support the entire company's technical needs (e-mail, databases, file management and support), therefore making their involvement in the creative departments only part of their responsibilities.

However, it is not arguable anymore that today's page-makeup workflow is incredibly more efficient than yesterday's and, in many ways, superior in quality.

Long gone are the laborious needs of overseeing the quality of film registration, color corrections and respective proofs ... making sure editorial saw the latest round of changes and conversely that the art department made the latest changes.

Because of desktop publishing, a new breed of designer has evolved, one who is comfortable with electronic page design and all of the production tools included therein. Management and workflow of layouts, scans, ads, proofing and deadlines has slowly become a function of the editorial and art departments. It seems that all of the in-house services that PMs performed no longer require a specialist.

As Rebecca Pappas, director of circulation and manufacturing at high-tech publisher BZ Media, notes, "The role of the production manager/director has, like many disciplines in publishing, morphed from a position of skilled craftsmanship into that of a commodity. With all the technology now in place, art directors can complete the imposition of their titles."

Many organizations, particularly nonprofit associations, have been operating without PMs for years. The reasons vary, but usually the organization cannot afford the additional person, there are minimal pages and ads to manage, and the issues tend to be less frequent. Editors often are responsible for all production responsibilities.

These organizations, while managing their internal workflow just fine, often lack the knowledge to negotiate with vendors. They tend to stay at the same printer based on a comfort factor—everything seems to work, it's within budget, so don't rock the boat. While loyalty to a vendor is admirable, it shouldn't be done at the expense of higher costs or quality, which may be the case with companies who don't have the knowledge and confidence to shop the market for better quality, quicker schedules and lower costs.

Someone on your staff needs to deal with outside vendors and to physically get the magazine produced. Bob Locke, a sales representative for Quebecor World says, "The typical 'production manager' I deal with today may also have the title of controller, CFO or even the publisher." This means people with other responsibilities may know just enough about printing to get their magazine produced, but maybe not enough to get it produced better or at a lower cost.

Many of these companies hire consultants to help them with vendor selections. A consultant is like a temporary staff expert, offering another vital service that production managers typically offer: market knowledge. They bring current industry knowledge and negotiating strategies to companies that cannot afford the year-round staff position. They know the printing, paper and distribution industries and can quickly steer you to the best vendors for your company.

However, good PMs are invaluable to publishers if they are kept current in new technologies and trends. They need to know the printing, ink and paper industries. They need to bring print-buying manpower to other collateral projects.

Simpler Times, Simpler Demands Even so, buying printing has become less complicated these days. In the last few years a new trend has started in which printer's price lists have become simplified. Many no longer offer items such as filmwork, interleaved or black-only forms, split fountains, cover inks, insert handling fees or storage charges. Costs for many items are being buried in other charges, such as, impositioning, plates, multiple-delivery charges and paper handling. Prepress charges are down to just a few items ... if any.

Not too long ago, PMs had to coordinate all outside vendors—typesetters, color separators and prepress houses, printers, paper suppliers and mailing houses—to work with each other. Most of these services are now supplied by the printer, and coordinating these services are the responsibility of the printer's customer-service representative.

More color separations are being done in-house. Color corrections are done by art directors with Photoshop, as is the page makeup and transmission. Proofs are no longer over-nighted back and forth, and manually shuffled from department to department for approval. Soft proofing is quickly eliminating hard-copy proofs. Many publishers now print with no contract (for color) proofs at all, and managing proofs used to take up much of the PM's work load.

Responsibility for creating the production schedule also shifted to the creative department, since it now manages the new electronic workflow. Even laying out the magazine—determining page count, color and form break placement—has become far less complicated.

Long gone are days when four-color was a premium and interleaved black-and white forms were standard. Almost every press is setup for four-color, and it has become far less expensive.

Even imposition planning to avoid in-line color conflicts is less important because today's presses minimize that problem.

The printing quality of our industry has improved to the point that rarely is "printing" (putting ink on paper) the main concern when hiring a printer. All printers print to SWOP (Specifications for Web Offset Publications), and many invest in the latest technologies. Computerized presses have eliminated most color, registration and folding problems.

When dealing with a printer, it is the prepress and postpress functions that have become more critical, and these responsibilities now belong to creative and circulation.

With all of these changes in the industry, one may wonder how the print-buying skills of publishers changed. The consensus is 'not for the better.' That is scary because generally the print-buying skills of most publishers were not all that good to begin with.

Logan Hughes, production services manager with Quebecor World, who has more than 20 years of experience in customer service, notes, "From the printer's perspective, the production manager's responsibilities have changed considerably over the last five years. We were accustomed to dealing almost totally with the production manager who was the 'expert' and daily decision-maker who controlled all aspects of the production. Now we talk to multiple people regarding such items as files, proofs, print order, distribution instructions, inserts and label data required for the production of the magazine."

Not having that point person makes communication more difficult, and as we have all learned at one point or another in our careers, the right hand must know what the left hand is doing or,

ultimately, timely and costly mistakes will happen.

Another desktop publishing phenomenon is that the staff often does not even work together in the same office. Editors, art directors and ad reps work out of satellite offices, many times in different states, and rarely see each other. Freelance designers—who usually work out of their own offices and are not even employees, in many cases, communicate directly with the printer.

According to Hughes, this makes work for the account manager much more challenging. "When problems arise, it often takes longer to get a decision from the publisher because of not having a single point of contact."

Richie Lesovoy, production director at Future Network USA, publisher of games, computing, action sports and musician magazines, says, "Prepress is getting easier, but art directors are sometimes not wanting to be production savvy yet, just design-oriented. [Publishers] need someone to make sure PDF files are consistently produced from title to title."

Jim Hamblin, sales representative for RR Donnelley, agrees. "Many times I receive a request for a bid, and the only information I get about prepress specifications is that it'll come on a disk. That's it. I don't know if they're native files, PDFs or what."

Many freelance designers never have been trained in the production processes of flightchecking and file formatting. Most printers are willing to go to the publisher's office and train staff, but it is physically impossible to do when those designers live and work all over the country.

Reinventing The PM So, is the PM destined for extinction? Yes ... and no.

"I believe that single-title publishing companies no longer need a PM," says Richie Lesovoy, production director, Future Network USA. "However, multi-titled companies definitely benefit from them." As Lesovoy points out, "A PM can leverage the combined needs and resources to buy printing and paper most efficiently. Good PMs pay for themselves."

That is an excellent point to remember. The PM manages the biggest expenses a publishing company has (paper and printing) and is in the position to save thousands and thousands of dollars through good negotiating and management. Lesovoy also points out that at a multiple-title company a PM is invaluable in coordinating all of the "other" printing needs, such as inserts, versions and packaging.

So, while PMs may have a place at many publishing companies (for now), like the color separator, they need to reinvent themselves.

Steven W. Frye is owner of Frye Publication Consulting, a printing and publishing consultancy in Hailey, Idaho. He is an expert in magazine- and catalog-production processes, and has negotiated printing, paper and distribution contracts for dozens of publishers. He can be reached at Steve@SteveFrye.com.